

***The Irish Times***

## ***The gulf between two worlds***

### ***A New Life***

**After a career in India and Arabia, Noel and Joan Scanlon moved to Achill, writes Sylvia Thompson.**

Noel and Joan Scanlon sit back in the sitting room which is the former lounge of the Amethyst Hotel in Keel, Achill Island, ready to share their unusual story of almost 20 years living in the Middle East and India and nearly 30 more since then on Achill Island,

As they begin to sketch in details of Noel's work setting up banks in places such as Aden and Mukulla in Yemen and Sharjah (a small Gulf state next to Dubai) and Bombay (Mumbai) in India, their work running the Amethyst Hotel for 15 years, his fiction writing and her paintings on silk, it almost seems like one is meeting fictional characters from a novel set in the Arabian Gulf and the West of Ireland.

This inner sanctum of what is now a rather dilapidated hotel, minutes walk from the expansive Keel Strand, is filled with Joan's paintings, shelves of books, a Bedouin coffee pot and Arab muscati chest, Some of the tribal rugs bought in the Arabian souks were transported back home among their personal belongings when they returned from their last posting in Muscat, Oman.

It immediately becomes apparent that the wealthy oil rich states bordering the Persian Gulf were a different place entirely when the Scanlons lived there, "It was frontier banking really. For instance, in the Hadhramut, the bank was housed on the edge of a camel park, There was no running water, no roads and no hospitals," says Noel.

"I worked as a secretary in the British Consulate at a time when places such as the Hadhramut and Aden were becoming dangerous places for Europeans to be," Joan says, "It was the last days of the British Empire really and many of our friends were killed during those years."

Noel reflects on the transformation that has since taken place in the Gulf states: "When we lived there it was totally primitive and even when the oil money first started coming in, each ruling sheik often only had one bank account.

"Then, gradually, banking became more sophisticated and everything got built - harbours, roads, schools and some of the most luxurious hotels in the world," he says.

Joan says: "We liked the Middle East more than India. We liked the Arabs. They are easy to communicate with."

Although keeping in touch still with the Arab world through his membership of MECAS (Middle Eastern Centre of Arabic Studies), Noel Scanlon has never returned to the places he lived.

"We travelled so much that we are not interested in travelling any more. I had no desire to see a Radisson hotel in Sharjah. Airports are such stressful places now. Instead we travel in the mind," says Noel.

"When we are working on one of Noel's books (Joan types and edits his manuscripts], we feel the house is full of characters," adds Joan.

It was once when home on leave from Muscat that Noel, then aged 40, decided to leave the world of banking and turn to writing.

"We moved into an old rectory in Kilrush, Co Clare which we had as a holiday home. We kept goats and I wrote adventure thrillers set in Arabia and India," he says.

Noel had four books published around that time including Quinn and the Desert Oil (John Murray) and Back Ashes (Robert Hale).

Some time later, they moved to Achill, first to Dereens and then later to the Amethyst Hotel in Keel.

"When we bought the hotel, it was totally derelict and people thought we were mad but for 15 years we ran a small guesthouse with a restaurant that was open seven days a week for the summer months. This financed our lives for the rest of the year," says Joan.

Their guests at the Amethyst included writer Edna O'Brien, filmmaker Pat O'Connor and actor Daniel Day Lewis.

"Pat O'Connor was particularly charmed by the dining room with its high ceiling and encouraged lots of people to come to the Amethyst," says Joan.

A diagnosis of arthritis in her neck forced Joan to discontinue the tough work of running the restaurant kitchen.

For five or six years after that the Scanlons ran a gallery in the hotel, selling Joan's paintings on silk.

Latterly, Noel has returned to his writing and is currently working on a thriller about an uprising that is the beginning of a Jihad organised by radical ayatullahs working with the al-Qaeda to take control of the oil-rich Arabian Gulf states.

"It's called Gulf which refers both to the geographical place and the gulf between the Christian and Muslim worlds," he says, adding that people in the West are generally unaware of the strong anti-Western feelings in the Arabian souks.

Joan continues with her silk paintings.

"People say that Achill is a great place to paint but I don't paint Achill. I paint the dogs [the Scanlons have three beautiful dogs], a goose or a domestic scene," she says. And how do they survive financially?

"I have a small pension. I sell paintings. We live simply," says Joan. "Our motivation is not financial."